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Vittorio Putti

1880 - 1940

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Putti, after a thorough medical training, became the assistant to Alessandro Codivilla, director and chief surgeon of the Istituto Ortopedico Rizzoli in Bologna. Codivilla was one of the greatest orthopedic surgeons of all time. He was the first to employ an aseptic method for skeletal traction in fractures and osteoperiosteal grafts of bone to encourage osteogenesis. It was he who first devised efficient methods for tendon transplantation and for gentle reduction of congenital dislocations of the hip. Putti worked under this master, and at his death succeeded him as the director of the institute; he was also made professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Bologna. He was an outstanding successor. Erudite, resourceful, skilful, with extraordinary executive ability, he built up the clinic to such an extent that it has become probably the most noted bone and joint center in the world. Some years ago the Clinical Surgical Club, whose members included the most famous American surgeons, made a series of visits to all the important surgical clinics of Europe. One of the members of the club, after his return to America, said that in his estimation Professor Putti's clinic surpassed all the other clinics they saw, in organization, technic and efficiency. Putti was also chief surgeon to the Hospital for Tuberculosis at Cortina in the Dolomites and probably was responsible for its establishment.

Putti had close friends in both England and America. He had great affection for Sir Robert Jones, and before World War II was in close touch with many other English orthopedic surgeons, especially Professor Harry Platt, of Manchester. He visited this country in 1921, as guest of the American Orthopaedic Association, and for many years after that he was a frequent visitor. He delivered the Lane Lectures in California, and in 1931 was honorary chief surgeon of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, at Professor Harvey Cushing's invitation. In 1936 he was president of the Bologna congress of the *Société internationale de Chirurgie orthopédique et Traumatologie*.

*Books and letters and other material by and about Professor Putti are on exhibit in the rotunda of the Boston Medical Library.

Putti contributed much to the advancement of bone and joint surgery, devising new nontraumatic methods for the early reduction of congenital dislocations of the hip, and being one of the first to report new methods and successful end results after arthroplastic operations. He originated and perfected various prosthetic apparatus in the extensive appliance shop that he established at the Istituto Rizzoli. His contributions to the literature of bone and joint surgery were valuable and many. His latest volume, *Cura operatoria delle fratture del colle del femore*, was published in Bologna in 1940.

About two years ago he suffered a severe attack of jaundice, from which he made a slow convalescence, but it had been believed in America that he had made a complete recovery. The exact cause of his death is unknown, but his passing has left a gap in the ranks of Italian, and indeed international, orthopedic surgeons that for the time being can hardly be filled. His legion of friends feel a sense of personal loss. His charm, his loyalty, his wisdom and his skill made him a unique character, commanding respect and compelling affection.


In addition to Putti's eminence in the field of orthopedic surgery, he gained for himself wide recognition as a medical historian. Brought up in an atmosphere of books, Putti found his greatest recreation in the history of his profession. The library in which he worked in Bologna, situated in a Benedictine monastery, known as *San Michele in Bosco*, was begun in the sixteenth century and contains manuscripts and books covering a period of over four hundred years. Not a prolific writer, he nevertheless made a distinct contribution to biography in a book entitled *Berengario da Carpi*, published in Bologna in 1937. This large quarto, handsomely printed and lavishly illustrated, contains the best account ever written of Berengario, the surgeon and pre-Vesalian anatomist who first drew anatomical figures from nature and depicted the separate muscles. Berengario taught surgery in Bologna from 1502 to 1527. In the biographical section of the book, Putti drew attention to many previously unknown editions of Berengario's works, particularly *De Fractura Caanii* (1518), which he translated into Italian as an appendix. The whole work is scholarly and could result only from profound and extensive research. Whatever claim to fame Putti may have in his vocation, certainly his name will

long be remembered for *Berengario*. He also wrote an article "Historic Artificial Limbs," first published in the *American Journal of Surgery* (6:111-118 and 246-253, 1929) and later issued in book form (New York, 1930).

Putti was a handsome, vivacious, almost debonair person, a striking figure, both in Bologna on his orthopedic wards and in his medieval library. Both backgrounds were fitting, but we prefer to remember him in Cortina d'Ampezzo, high up in the Dolomites, one September day in 1932. Cushing, Klebs, Fulton and one of us were motoring through Italy after the Physiological Congress in Rome. We came to Cortina from Venice, crossing the Piave and going through the Fadalto Pass to Pieve di Cadore, where Titian was born. In glorious weather, the Dolomites stood out in bold relief as we entered the cup-shaped valley of Cortina. Here Putti met us, smiling, gracious and hospitable. He was justly proud of his hospital in Cortina, a "country branch" of the *Istituto Ortopedico Rizzoli* in Bologna. Facing south, in a warm valley, surrounded by green grass, with sheep nibbling in place of lawn mowers, this clean attractive hospital for patients with tuberculosis of bones and joints was obviously Putti's special pride. And well it might be, for the mahogany-brown patients, so hardened to exposure both summer and winter, that they lived out of doors practically unclothed the year around, were a living example of his skilful treatment. At a dinner that night, Putti was at his best as a genial host, but occasionally a faraway look came into his eyes, and a slight suggestion of sadness clouded his brow. Was the period of international exchange of companionship drawing to a close? Putti showed some uneasiness that night, as if his brilliant spirit were being dimmed. Parting the next day, one wondered what the future held for any of us, for we were certainly entering a new world and Putti, as well as the rest of us, was living in the past.

Unconsciously perhaps, Philippi Scaglietti, his first assistant physician in Bologna, paid to Putti the most fitting tribute, when he cabled one of us on November 1, 1940: "We are grieved to communicate the sudden death of our beloved master, Professor Putti." Master of orthopedic surgery, master of biography and bibliographic precision, Putti stands out as a towering figure, clean and straight as the Dolomites he loved so well.

H. R. V. and R. B. O.



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